



HOWARD COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CITIZEN SERVICES

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TO: Lonnie Robbins, Chief Administrative Officer
FROM: Susan Rosenbaum, Director, Department of Citizen Services
DATE: March 17, 2008
RE: Testimony in support of a Board to Promote Self-Sufficiency

While Howard County is an affluent community, there are also individuals and families who lack sufficient food, adequate housing, and appropriate medical care. In 2005, 3% of all Howard County families and 12% of families with a female head of household had incomes below the poverty level. (The Federal poverty level, currently \$20,650 for a family of four, is not a reasonable indicator of ability to meet basic needs in Howard County, however.) Even more troubling is that the percentage of families in three of the four lowest income levels is growing.

With rising costs, there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for energy and food assistance. Agencies and faith-based organizations providing crisis intervention services are seeing clients who never accessed their help before, and the issues they present are becoming more complex. The growing financial crisis will put even greater numbers at risk.

The Human Services Master Plan has identified the ability to meet basic needs (food, housing, health care, transportation) as a priority for community-wide action. The issue of economic self-sufficiency has two dimensions: 1) assisting those who are in crisis or poverty to obtain the services they need while encouraging lifestyle adjustments aimed at preventing future crisis, and 2) keeping those currently at risk from falling into crisis or poverty.

Repeated studies have shown that prevention services are less expensive than crisis care. Building the resources needed to keep individuals and families out of crisis – *to promote self-sufficiency* – is a wise investment of County dollars and may ultimately reduce the strain on current human services system.

Finding successful strategies to promote economic self-sufficiency which focus on prevention rather than crisis management will not be simple. Issues as comprehensive and inter-related as self-sufficiency and poverty require a great deal of coordination and collaboration between many organizations – government, non-profit, faith-based, and for-profit.

The creation of a Board to Promote Self-sufficiency would bring together key stakeholders to determine the most appropriate strategies for addressing poverty and self-sufficiency issues in our community. It provides a vehicle to support greater collaboration among organizations and foster innovative new partnerships, creating a framework that allows every member of the community to be self-sufficient to the fullest extent possible.

This Board would expand upon the current local board on homelessness, giving it a broader focus. Issue-specific committees will be created, so members of the board on homelessness who are not appointed to the Board to Promote Self-sufficiency will be able to participate in its committee on homelessness.

Having a formal Board will also position Howard County to take advantage of additional grant opportunities that require a formal governance structure. Federal legislation that may require such an entity is currently under review, and if enacted will have significant impact on the County's ability to continue receiving funding to support crisis intervention homeless assistance programs.

The fiscal Impact of this legislation will be \$2,000 for FY09, to cover any incidental expenses of the Board.

cc: Jennifer Sager, Legislative Coordinator
Lois Mikkila, Deputy Director, Citizen Services
Cheryl Mattis, Fiscal Officer, Citizen Services